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MEMORANDUM

The Soviet Leadership: Toward a New Configuration?

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7 November 1972

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

7 November 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Soviet Leadership: Toward a New Configuration?*

NOTE

Unmistakably, the Soviet leadership is less collective today than at any time since Khrushchev's overthrow in October 1964. Brezhnev's personal role in Soviet politics and policy is more evident than ever before. He is putting his own imprint on the execution of Soviet policy and probably on its formulation as well, though, necessarily, we can be less sure of the second proposition than of the first. In some sense, then, a "Brezhnev era" in the Soviet leadership is in progress, though the term still needs to be qualified.

This paper examines the scope of Brezhnev's personal power as well as the factors which both limit it and enhance it. It concludes that his authority might come under challenge owing to recent reverses for Soviet policy, but that, if it does, he is strongly placed to face down opposition. It is further concluded that the next year may be critical in determining whether the trend towards a consolidation of Brezhnev's personal power will continue or whether the factors making for the preservation of "collectivity" will again assert themselves. It also argues that, in any case, the point has been reached when the present pattern of personalities and politics in the top leadership must almost certainly begin to shift.

* *This memorandum was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and discussed with other components of the CIA, who are in general agreement with its judgments.*

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1. In the course of Soviet history, collectivity and personal rule have alternated as the dominant mode of leadership. During the greater part of this period, however, in the flux of Soviet politics, elements of both have been present. *Pure* collectivity -- the equal sharing of power and authority by a number of men -- has never existed in the USSR. There have also been important differences between personal rulers in terms of the amount of power each had and the way he used it, as, for example, between Stalin and Khrushchev. Between 1957 and 1964, Khrushchev was in a meaningful sense a personal ruler. He was the prime initiator of policy and he came close to controlling all the important levers of political power, to the point where he could manipulate, override, by-pass or simply ignore the rest of the oligarchy. But Stalin had succeeded in establishing an almost absolute dictatorship. For a variety of reasons, Khrushchev did not, and his failure to achieve unchallenged supremacy ultimately cost him his position.

2. Brezhnev would also face risks in attempting the complete destruction of collectivity. The collective arrangement has proven to be more than a temporary alliance of convenience, exceeding expectations both in terms of durability and serviceability. It managed -- no doubt not without considerable strain, but still

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without coming unstuck -- to carry the Soviet leadership through some difficult policy choices (e.g., with respect to the development of Soviet strategic forces and the decision to enter SALT, the Middle East, Czechoslovakia, and the Chinese problem). Under this system of rule, the members of the leadership themselves and the lower levels of the Party and government bureaucracies have had more political, professional, and personal security than any of them can remember. Under this system, also, none of the important interest groups -- the Party apparatus, industrial management, the military, etc. -- have been badly treated and each has had, to one degree or another, the means to make itself felt in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the stresses of policy formulation and of internal politics have evidently together strengthened the claims of unilateral authority and initiative, in the person of Brezhnev, against those of committee rule.

Factors Which Have Limited Brezhnev's Power

3. As chief of the Party, Brezhnev from the beginning had a headstart toward predominance over his colleagues in the Politburo (from 1952 to 1966, the Presidium). It might be considered surprising that he has been so long in establishing his primacy. Stalin and Khrushchev needed roughly six and four years, respectively,

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to do so. But the growth of Brezhnev's power has proceeded on the whole steadily and smoothly. Apart from what may have been an attempt to seize the Party leadership from him in 1965-1966 by Aleksandr Shelepin, Brezhnev's position seems never to have been seriously challenged, perhaps just because he made himself the champion of collectivity. All the while, the power of his colleagues in the Politburo relative to his own has gradually declined.

4. The slowness and persistence of Brezhnev's progress are probably attributable largely to the underlying tension, still unresolved, between the fear of strong leadership, on the one hand, and the pressures for more dynamic leadership, on the other. The painful experience of Khrushchev's arbitrariness and the even more fearful memory of Stalin's autocracy were certainly powerful factors in the formation of the collective and no doubt helped to hold it together subsequently. In such circumstances, Brezhnev's position in the Politburo must have owed something to a capacity for conciliation and compromise, as well, perhaps, to certain negative considerations: his lack in the eyes of his colleagues of the kind of personal qualities -- excessive ambitiousness, ruthlessness, intellectual superiority -- which might have made him seem a threat to them.

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5. It is also true that, beyond these considerations, a collective mode of leadership in many ways makes better organizational sense in Soviet conditions than control by a single, immensely powerful leader would. Given the intense concentration of political, economic, and social control and of decision-making power at the top under the Soviet system and the growing complexity of the policy issues posed, some division of function and authority -- largely absent when Stalin and Khrushchev were at the peak of their powers -- may seem desirable, perhaps indispensable, to the Soviet Party elite. At the same time, with the growth within the Soviet bureaucracy of separate, occasionally overlapping and conflicting, institutional interests, some mechanism for top level adjudication between them has also become essential. The Politburo since Khrushchev's time has, besides setting the main lines of policy, come to perform this additional function: it constitutes a clearing-house through whose members the various functional (industrial, agricultural, defense, security, etc.) and regional interests receive a hearing at the highest level.

6. There have been other impediments which have prevented the General Secretary from converting his natural advantages into clear-cut domination. One of these is the ruling by the Party Central Committee (to which the Politburo is nominally responsible), made

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soon after Khrushchev's ouster, which prohibits the occupancy by one man of the top posts in both the Party and government structures. Another is the fact that the Party chief's powers in relation to the other members of the Politburo are not strictly defined: he must to some extent make of the position what he can. He is, for instance, evidently not entitled by right to the decisive word in Politburo deliberations. Nor is his role in the formulation and execution of domestic or foreign policy precisely fixed. Brezhnev seems to have chosen, or to have felt obliged, during the largest part of his tenure in the Party post, not to throw his weight around excessively. For some time he concentrated on those executive responsibilities, e.g., internal Party management and relations with the Communist states of Eastern Europe which were quite properly his by virtue of his Party office. (An important exception is defense policy, in which Brezhnev has for some time had considerable authority; another is the agricultural sphere, in which Brezhnev has been prominently involved since he took over the top Party post, despite the inherent hazards in this sphere.) He expanded his field only bit by bit.

7. There is little to suggest that Brezhnev's colleagues have taken serious alarm at any point at the growth of his power or mounted a determined effort to cut him down to size. Whether

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by tacit agreement or force of circumstance Brezhnev and his colleagues seem, in fact, to have observed a certain mutual restraint in their relationship with one another. On the one hand, other members of the Politburo have for the most part not carried their political and policy differences with Brezhnev to the point of political confrontation. Some of them must, in fact, have hitched themselves to his wagon, seeing advantage to themselves, at least until now, in the consolidation of his power. For his part, Brezhnev has not resorted in blatant fashion to the classical Soviet power plays: by packing the Central Committee, or by engineering wholesale changes in the Politburo itself. The turnover in the Central Committees elected at the Party Congresses in 1966 and 1971 was below the rate at Congresses in the Khrushchev and Stalin eras, well below that of some of the earlier Congresses. Continuity in the Politburo has been considerable, even to the extent that the three men with whom Brezhnev seems to have had his most serious political and policy difficulties -- Shelepin, Voronov, and Shelest -- as of now remain members, although they have been deprived of other important posts. And, while a Brezhnev "personality cult" has seemed to be sprouting from time to time in recent years -- possibly planted in some cases by eager-to-please underlings -- the full bloom has never emerged.

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Factors Enhancing Brezhnev's Power

8. As against the many factors which have served as a check on Brezhnev, he has, however, all along had much going for him. As head of the Party in a Party-state, his prestige is inherently superior to that of his fellow leaders, and ultimately the highest authority in the state is embodied in him. Although Kosygin's post as Chairman of the Council of Ministers is commonly equated to the Premiership outside the USSR, and Podgorny, as Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, is treated as the titular President or Head of State, the powers associated with these titles actually reside in the Politburo, of which Brezhnev is in effect chairman. As such he is in a position to exercise greater weight than his colleagues in every area of state policy. Perhaps equally important, he has the right to organize the Politburo's agenda and to manage its proceedings. But there are many who would consider these powers as less significant in practical political terms than those the General Secretary exercises as head of the Party Secretariat, which is, among other things, responsible for key appointments throughout the Party and government apparatuses and for Party supervision of the military and security services.

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Party chiefs have of course always turned their patronage power to personal advantage, and Brezhnev is no exception.*

9. With these advantages, judiciously and unobtrusively employed, there was no reason why Brezhnev should not sooner or later have begun to move out ahead, provided he succeeded in avoiding blame for any egregious policy failures. In domestic affairs, he has generally occupied what in Soviet terms is the middle ground with regard to economic, social, and cultural policy. He has identified himself, at least until recently, with the *status quo*, in some cases, the *status quo ante* Khrushchev. Partly because of his Party position, he has been a consistent advocate of ideological discipline. (Brezhnev sponsored a revision of agricultural policy in 1965, entailing mainly increased investment, but the initiative for the more innovative reform of industrial management introduced later in 1965 was with Kosygin.) In external policy, where the going got rough for the USSR, Brezhnev found safety in numbers, as, for example, in the Middle East in June 1967 and in Czechoslovakia in July-August 1968. In the first instance, Brezhnev, Kosygin, and Podgorny each had some responsibility for dealing with the difficulties created by the Arab-Israeli war. In the case of

* *Given the nature of their material, Kremlinologists will, however, naturally have various convictions as to what extent and on whom Brezhnev has been able to confer this patronage.*

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Czechoslovakia, though Brezhnev had been principally responsible for dealing with the problem in the months leading up to the Soviet invasion, at the point of decision virtually the entire Politburo became directly and visibly involved. In both cases, care was taken to secure the endorsement of the Central Committee for the courses taken.

10. Nonetheless, the drift and indecisiveness which characterized Soviet policy in many areas for the first five years or so after Khrushchev became evident within the USSR as well as outside. This must have created some sense of the inadequacies of collective decision-making. This method had justified itself during the post-Khrushchev period of political and policy consolidation. But toward the end of 1969 this phase was about over: internal economic and administrative dislocation had been corrected; the Party apparatus had regained its paramount role in the bureaucratic structure; the USSR had gained considerable confidence in its strategic posture vis-a-vis the US; the turbulence in Eastern Europe had largely subsided; and the moment of severest tension with the Chinese had evidently passed. It is likely that at this juncture, as a more active and innovative Soviet policy began to develop, particularly in relations with the West, decision-making by consensus became both more difficult and less convenient. In these circumstances,

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there was probably also increased need for an authoritative figure to integrate, enunciate, and verify the main lines of policy.

11. There has been considerable evidence during the last three years that Brezhnev is now playing this part. He first assumed a more prominent place in the promulgation of domestic economic policy. Subsequently, he enlarged his direct involvement in foreign affairs and is obviously no longer confined to dealings with the Communist states. He has made a state visit to France. He took sole charge of Willy Brandt's visit to the Crimea in September 1971. He played a central role at the Moscow Summit. And he has evidently now assembled a personal staff of specialists to support him in this expanded activity in foreign affairs. Foreigners who meet him generally find him self-confident and showing a good grasp of the business at hand, which was not always the case in earlier years.

12. In mid-1970, however, there were some signs of more than the usual stress within the leadership and rumors in Moscow of serious internal conflict. It may be that other leaders were contesting Brezhnev's right to play a larger role and to set new lines of policy and this resistance may have had something to do

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with the postponement of the Party Congress scheduled for 1970. But, if so, the difficulty was overcome. The 24th Party Congress, when it did finally convene in the spring of 1971, confirmed Brezhnev's pre-eminence; it witnessed the unveiling of what was officially referred to as the Brezhnev Peace Program in foreign policy and a domestic program which promised a new departure in economic policy: a shift of priorities in favor of the Soviet consumer.

13. The sharing of public responsibility for the top-level management of policy among Brezhnev, Kosygin, and Podgorny, practiced for some time, is now considerably less pronounced. Yet, the processes involved in the formulation of Soviet policy, as opposed to its implementation, are so thoroughly concealed that there can be no assurance that Brezhnev has become the architect of policy to the same extent as he has become its exponent. In fact, there seems to be little that is original with Brezhnev in the main lines of the policies now being followed. It is entirely probable, moreover, that most of these would enjoy a preponderance of support at the top echelon whether put forward by Brezhnev or not. The present stress on ideological conformity and the prevailing conservatism in domestic social and cultural policy (applied, however, without the extreme repression of an earlier era) accord with the instincts and needs of the Soviet bureaucratic establishment. Efforts which

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support the USSR's position of strategic parity with the US and its superpower status generally and the maintenance of a firm line toward China are policies which have the widest political backing in the USSR. The detente line -- especially the more flexible approach to West Germany -- and the easing of relations with the US seem to have caused some political strain. Shelest, for one, evidently resisted this policy with some vigor. There was probably also controversy over the projected change of emphasis in economic policy. But to the extent that these policies, though they may cause some offense to orthodox sensibilities, promise relief from the threat of war and an amelioration of the standard of living, they, too, no doubt enjoy wide popularity with important political interests as well as with the Soviet public.

Dangers and Opportunities Arising from Brezhnev's New Role

14. Nonetheless, in his more forward position Brezhnev will inevitably attract a larger share of the blame when setbacks occur. The troubles now afflicting Soviet agriculture -- which could render plans for an increase in the standard of living unrealizable for some time to come and throw the entire current five-year economic plan out of kilter -- are peculiarly his troubles because of his close personal involvement with that area of policy. Brezhnev has

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also led the way on Soviet policy toward Germany -- and an adverse turn for that policy, e.g., the failure of the SPD-FDP coalition to hold office in West Germany in the November elections -- could also undermine Brezhnev's political strength. Even in those cases where Brezhnev's personal responsibility is less clear, as with the expulsion of Soviet military personnel from Egypt, he is probably vulnerable to criticism.

15. If Brezhnev's effective, usable power inside the political structure has grown at anything like the same rate as his public prestige and prominence, he ought to be able to overcome these embarrassments and others which may occur. What evidence there is suggests that this is the case, but this kind of evidence is not highly dependable. As long as Brezhnev has the authority to lead but not to command absolute obedience -- as is now the case -- uncertainty about his position will persist. And Brezhnev may have to continue to take care to insure that any contemplated moves have substantial backing within the Politburo. One way to do this is, where important issues are concerned, to seek to discover where the consensus lies and then stick fairly close to it. Another is to alter the composition of the Politburo by addition, which has already happened,* or by elimination, which could be about to happen.

* *Four new full members and one candidate member were added to the Politburo in 1971, and another candidate earlier this year, bringing it to its greatest size in 12 years.*

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Shelest, formerly Party chief in the Ukraine who evidently challenged the decision to proceed with the Summit in May -- and as a result, lost his Ukrainian post but not his place in the Politburo -- may have put his name near the top of the list of those whose days on the Politburo are numbered. Other members who have had their run-ins with Brezhnev and could be found expendable, if Brezhnev should now decide that he needs greater security and has enough momentum to obtain it, are Shelepin and Voronov.

16. Even without a shake-up, there will almost certainly be a fair number of comings and goings in the Politburo in the next few years. (If this turns out not to be the case, it will only be because the *status quo* is being artificially maintained for cosmetic purposes.) This will be due to the effects of age and failures of health, a point which, though made often about the very old Soviet leadership in recent years, is bound to come closer to being proven as time goes on. The four men named full members of the Politburo at the time of the Party Congress in 1971 had an average age (then) of 55. Still, the average age of the Politburo as a whole is more than 61 (for full members 62; for candidate members 60). Among full members of the Politburo, Kosygin is 68 and from time to time is reported to be tired and ailing; Podgorny is 69; Suslov is nearly 70 and also reported to be in uncertain health; and Pelshe

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is 73. Mzhavanadze, who recently resigned as Party head of the Georgian Republic at 70 has probably thereby lost his entitlement to remain very long as a candidate member of the Politburo.

17. It would seem, therefore, that something is bound to give and Brezhnev may have the opportunity in the near future to begin the reconstruction of the Politburo according to his own preferences. There would be a certain risk of upsetting the political equilibrium in the process, but the gradual enhancement of Brezhnev's power and responsibility may have reduced this risk: Kosygin's departure from the Politburo would, for example, probably have a less unsettling effect now than it would have had a few years ago, although the choice of a successor would still not be easy. Brezhnev may be strongly tempted to seize the opportunity to alter the composition of the leading political organs in order both to achieve greater political security and to gain fuller control over the policy-making mechanism. But the bar to Brezhnev's adding control of the Council of Ministers to his Party post still stands and it remains to be seen if he will try to circumvent this. There have been rumors in Moscow of plans to name Brezhnev to the chairmanship of a kind of Council of State which would give him an alternative authoritative government position.

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18. Thus, the present constellation of power and personalities in the Politburo is not likely to remain as it is very much longer. The clash of personal ambitions, policy conflicts, and the actuarial laws seem to have begun to take their toll within the leadership. Some new blood -- not much yet, but some -- is being infused into the top ranks. Long delayed, partly by design, the process of change and renovation of the leadership once begun might very quickly gather momentum. At the same time, Brezhnev has taken on greater responsibility but seems to lack still the degree of prestige, authority, or control of the levers of power which his predecessors had in one way or another. He is therefore in a more exposed position politically. He could, in these circumstances, try to wrap himself again in the security of the group. It is likelier that the logic of his situation will cause him to seek to enlarge his power further.

19. Total domination is, however, almost certainly beyond Brezhnev's grasp, even if he were disposed to seek it. Any sign that he was aiming at completely extinguishing collectivity would inevitably arouse fears of the unpredictability and arbitrariness which its end might portend. By ignoring such attitudes Brezhnev would place himself in danger of being overthrown by the same kind of palace coup which ended Khrushchev's career. Awareness of this

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consideration on the part of Brezhnev himself seems likely to continue to act as a check on his political ambitions. Where policy itself is concerned, a Brezhnev possessed of greater power and self-confidence may begin to take an even more vigorous lead in an attempt to shape it more closely to his own design. In broad terms, the design to which he now appears to be heavily committed is one which calls for the continued pursuit of a detente line in foreign policy linked to a steady growth of Soviet power, and, at home, progress in economic modernization but of such a guarded kind as will not threaten to damage the existing political and social fabric.

Beyond Brezhnev

20. How long Brezhnev, nearing 66, can remain in power, no matter what the form and dimensions of this power, can only be a matter of guesswork. Though he is believed to have had trouble with his heart and other health problems, he might conceivably continue in office for another five-ten years. But the actuarial odds would favor a shorter rather than a longer term, and it would seem that he and other leaders ought to be giving some thought to who might replace him as General Secretary. Kirilenko has regularly in recent years deputized for Brezhnev in his Party role, but Kirilenko is himself 66 and would hardly be likely to be more than a transitional

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successor. Shcherbitsky (54), Kulakov (54), Katushev (45), who is a Party Secretary, but not yet a member of the Politburo, and Shelepin (54), as long as he remains in the picture, are other potentials. Or some dark horse -- a less prominent individual, possibly now serving in a provincial post -- might in time emerge as the new Party chief.

21. The point is that the life of the post-Khrushchev oligarchy is running out, but the succession to the important posts is in no way assured. Especially is this so with respect to the post of Party chief. Yet, it is still the case that in the Soviet system power is concentrated at the top and it tends at the top to flow into the hands of the General Secretary. It is one of the chief flaws of this system, as has often been observed, that neither the power, nor the limitations on the powers, of a post which is tantamount to that of chief executive, have ever been statutorily defined. There is, at the same time, no regularized procedure for filling the post and throughout Soviet history succession to it has always produced a period of political struggle and uncertainty in policy.

22. So little is known of the particular policy preferences of the individuals who might compose a future leadership, much less how they might behave if given greater responsibility, that an

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attempt to foresee what amalgam of policies would emerge under a new alignment is bound to have small value. This would depend in part on such unknowns as whether a changeover was precipitated by failures of policy and which ones. Certainly, new men will devise new tactics in future situations, but tactics will vary in any case with changing circumstances. They may also bring new vigor to the execution of policy. However, the notion that a new generation of leaders -- not formed like the present men in the experiences of the Stalinist era -- would tend to favor more liberal economic and social policies, is, in the nature of things, an untested hypothesis. It can even be supposed that men who come to the top via provincial Party posts will, at least initially, bring a narrower point of view to bear.

23. No matter what their background, any new leaders, even if they are so inclined, will find it difficult to overcome the bureaucratic and institutional inhibitions to meaningful political and social change or to significant alterations of the economic structure. At the same time, in its conduct of foreign relations, a reconstituted leadership might, like the post-Khrushchev leadership, need a period of retrenchment and might pull back for a time from a policy of more open dealings with the West. But these men would

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also, more likely than not, come to see the USSR's interests as being best served by "peaceful coexistence" with the US, detente in Europe, and policies designed to check the growth of Chinese power.

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